

About human papillomavirus (HPV) and your cancer

This information was designed with the help of cancer patients. It is for people who have head and neck cancer that may be caused by human papillomavirus, known as HPV. Scientists are still studying HPV and do not yet have all the answers. The information in this sheet is based on the best scientific evidence that we do have. These are the facts about HPV that cancer patients thought were most important. Some frequently asked questions are answered on the other side of this sheet.

HPV is a virus that causes about half of oropharyngeal cancers. These are head and neck cancers that can involve the tonsils, tongue base and soft palate. It also causes cervical cancer and some cancers of the vulva, vagina, penis, and anus. Head and neck cancers caused by HPV usually respond well to treatment.

HPV affects both men and women. It is so common that most of us get it at some point in our lives. It is passed from one person to another during sex or physical intimacy. It can be transmitted by oral sex, as well as other forms of intimate contact. HPV may be transmitted by deep or 'French' kissing but not by everyday contact with friends and family, such as sharing drinks or kissing on the cheek.

Although HPV is very common, most people never know they have it. That's because there aren't usually any symptoms. The body's own defences generally clear it up. In a few people, HPV stays in the cells of the affected area for many months or even years. Then it sometimes causes the cells to change. These changes may eventually lead to cancer. Even if HPV does cause cells to change, it can take another 10 years or more for cancer to develop. So, although these cancers do sometimes affect younger adults, they often appear in middle or later life. It is very hard to know when you got HPV or who you got it from. That's because it may have been many years ago.

There is no treatment for HPV, but there's now a vaccination to prevent it. It's best for young people to be vaccinated before they are sexually active.



These are the questions that cancer patients asked:

Question	Answer
What does this mean for my relationship?	<p>Having HPV-related cancer doesn't mean you or your current partner have had sex with someone else. The virus was likely picked up many years ago and there is no need for shame or blame.</p> <p>You and your partner will have already shared whatever infections you have and no changes in physical intimacy are needed.</p>
Am I or my partner at risk of getting another HPV-related cancer?	<p>You might be at a slightly higher risk, so you should report any symptoms to your doctor, but remember that these cancers are very rare.</p>
What about previous partners?	<p>There is no need to tell previous partners you had HPV. There is no test or treatment for it; most people clear the virus without treatment and without even knowing they had it.</p>
Could I have done anything to prevent getting HPV?	<p>No, it is so common that nearly all adults get it and condoms would not have given you complete protection.</p> <p>However, if you are a smoker, giving up smoking may help your recovery from cancer.</p>
Could I have got HPV any other way?	<p>This is very unlikely because HPV targets a type of cell found in the lining of parts of the body that only come into contact during sexual intimacy.</p>